



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS®  
OF THE UNITED STATES

**STATEMENT BY MARY G. WILSON, PRESIDENT  
LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF THE UNITED STATES  
U.S. ELECTION ASSISTANCE COMMISSION  
PUBLIC MEETING ON THE 2006 ELECTION**

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It is a privilege to be here, and I commend the EAC for convening this important and timely discussion of the 2006 election. As a strong supporter of effective implementation of the Help America Vote Act, the League of Women Voters believes in the work of the EAC – and in its mandate to improve the administration of elections across the United States.

The question we are here to talk about today is a simple one: How did it go? After all the hard work and all the struggles – on a whole range of issues, from election equipment to statewide voter registration lists – was the 2006 election, in fact, an improvement? And the answer we give, after discussions with nearly all state League presidents, is a resounding ... “It depends.”

Thankfully, the major meltdown that many had feared did not come to pass. As compared with Election 2000, this year nearly two-thirds of voters used new voting machines, every polling place administered new ID requirements, and virtually every voter registration record was managed in new ways. Despite all these changes, and despite the multitude of challenges that come with implementing reforms in a large, complex and decentralized election system like ours, the bulk of the news stories on the morning of November 8<sup>th</sup> were about who won and who lost – not how the voting went. And, despite all the talk about the potential for fraud in the absence of restrictive (and blatantly discriminatory) voter identification procedures, it simply doesn't seem to have happened. Yes there were problems, but widespread voter fraud wasn't one of them. Exit polling data showed that 87 percent of voters were confident that their votes would be counted accurately. Yet, as discussions this week at the Technical Guidelines Development Committee have highlighted, there are still important issues to be resolved with respect to the types of equipment on which voters cast their ballots.

Overall turnout was nothing to brag about, but voters were engaged and enthusiastic. The League's election-information Web site, [VOTE411.org](http://VOTE411.org), logged nearly one million visitors in the ten days leading up to and on Election Day, the vast majority of them seeking information about the location of their polling place.

Thus, there was some good news. But there was some not-so-good news as well.

The League of Women Voters has always judged the success or failure of elections by one criterion above all others: Were the voters well served? And whether you were well served as a voter in 2006 depended on three factors: where you live, who you are, and how you voted:

- First, where you live. Voters in many communities across the country had an easy time of it on November 7<sup>th</sup>. And that is indeed something to celebrate. But if you live in Sarasota or in Denver, or any of the other places where there were serious problems with long lines, ballot shortages, equipment malfunctions and other issues, celebrating is the last thing on your mind.
- Second, who you are. Countless numbers of voters across the country were asked for photo identification when it was not required. Also, verified stories of voter intimidation in Virginia and elsewhere showed that, 40 years after the civil rights movement, your race, income level or age still can make you vulnerable to surreptitious tactics designed to keep you from exercising your right to vote.
- Lastly, how you voted. What kind of ballot design you faced, what kind of machine you voted on, whether you voted early, by mail or in person – all of these were factors in whether you were well served as a voter or not in 2006.

The fact that your experience as a voter depended on all these different things – where you live, who you are and how you voted – suggests that we still have a great deal of work to do in order to achieve the promise of American democracy. Does this mean we need to consider another major revamping of U.S. elections before 2008? Now, one month after the last election, I believe it is too early to answer that question. What is clear, however, is that we – and, by “we,” I mean all of us who care about voters and to whom voters look for assurance about our election process – need to do a better job at designing, administering, implementing and overseeing election systems. We also need to ensure reforms we’ve already begun are fully implemented. And the EAC has a critical role in ensuring uniform, nondiscriminatory, effective implementation of election reform measures across the nation.

During the three months immediately prior to the November election, I traveled around the country and visited with elections officials, voters and League leaders. I talked to people about elections in their communities, about what was changing, about how to protect voters and how to make sure they are able to cast a vote and have it counted without any problems. Then, since the election, I’ve talked with League leaders around the country about how things went in their communities and their states. And, yes, during those conversations, I heard a lot about the need for a voter verifiable paper record of votes cast to give officials an independently auditable record as well as to give voters confidence in the voting process. This is a topic that our League members care greatly about and at our Convention in June the delegates adopted a Resolution calling for all election systems to have a voter verifiable paper ballot or record that could be randomly audited. The EAC will hear more from the League on this issue in the months to come as the Commission reviews recommendations for the 2007 voluntary voting system guidelines.

Today, though, I want to highlight an issue that dominated what I heard, both before and after the election. Regardless of the type of machine used at a polling place, the key to a successful election is *How well does the election workforce – from professional elections officials to volunteer poll workers – do their jobs?* Critical questions are how the polling place is organized and administered, and how the election workforce is recruited, trained and managed.

If you look at the problems we saw in the 2006 election, you see that most are related to management issues – long lines, poor ballot designs, paper ballot shortages, confusion about ID requirements, etc. All of these are election administration problems. The EAC can play a powerful role in assessing why these problems happen, sharing best practices, and offering guidance to elections officials about how to make the system work better for the voter. Through investments in research, the EAC also can lead the way to a better understanding of how to organize and manage polling places for maximum efficiency. We need to look at issues of flow – what happens to voters from check-in until they leave. We need to look at the numbers and types of voting and list management equipment that need to be in place to serve a given number of voters, and we need to look at what kinds of back-up systems can help. We need to audit election systems so we know whether they are really working properly. We also need to do more in the area of ensuring that every polling place is “ready to go” on Election Day. The voters should not be guinea pigs.

And, of course, we also need to do more on the issue of poll worker recruitment and training. In my conversations with League leaders and elections officials around the country, this topic comes up again and again. If we examine the overall issue of election management, we can see that many of the election management problems are the result of poll workers not being adequately supported or prepared to do their jobs. This is not the poll workers’ fault at all. They simply have not been provided with the tools or the training they need to keep things running smoothly, and to address problems as they arise. From the League’s perspective, the one issue that must be a priority for the EAC between now and 2008 is *poll worker management*. The League commends you for your work in this area thus far and is proud to be a part of the team the Commission has worked with to put together a first-of-its-kind guidebook on poll worker recruitment, training and retention. We look forward to continuing this collaboration in the future. There needs to be a better understanding of the types of skills that are needed for various tasks at the polling place, the training requirements for poll workers, good training practices, performance standards and more. For example, everyone talks about the usability of various voting machines for voters, but what about their usability for poll workers? We need systems in place that are pro-voter; but they can’t be pro-voter if they are not pro-poll worker as well.

Whether we’re looking at poll worker management or at any of the other administrative issues I have talked about, the League believes the EAC can play an important role in spreading the word about innovative practices – new approaches to old challenges. Earlier this year, we published a monograph called “Thinking Outside the Ballot Box,”

where we explored the use of Vote Centers, early voting, electronic poll books and other polling place innovations in use by jurisdictions across the country. Elections officials can learn a great deal from their peers who are experimenting with these and other approaches to improve elections. The EAC is perfectly positioned to support that learning by convening officials and sharing information about innovative practices that are delivering good results for voters.

But the job is not just to spread the word about all these wonderful innovations. Even more important, we need to help elections officials understand how to do innovation right – and what needs to happen to make these innovations work. In Denver, for example, we saw elections officials embrace a polling place innovation – Vote Centers – that has proven quite effective elsewhere in the state. But Denver’s Vote Centers, in fact, caused more problems than they solved. And, again, the issue was how these polling places were managed – getting things up and running on time, the numbers of provisional ballots on hand, the functioning of the equipment, poll worker training, and so forth.

Better election administration. It may not be the sexiest issue out there, but in the League’s view, it is an issue on which we must focus. We may never get it exactly right, but we need to create an elections system that is always striving to do better by the voter. Electoral participation in this country is still far below what it should be. And my hunch is that if we do better by the voter, we will begin to attract a lot of non-voters back into the system as well.

The 2008 election is going to be a crucial one for our country. We need to apply the lessons of 2006 to make sure that voters are well served regardless of where they live, who they are, or how they vote. We need to make sure that the answer to whether the system works in 2008 is not “It depends” but a resounding “Yes.”

Thank you very much.